Mining Watch Afghanistan presents proposals to MOMP to fight corruption and create prosperity in Afghanistan extractive sector.

Center for Justice, Judicial and Anti-Corruption launches operations.

Integrity Watch first Quarterly Magazine was published in Dari and Pashto.

The mission of Integrity Watch is to put corruption under the spotlight through community monitoring, research, and advocacy.
Is There Any Hope in the Fight Against Corruption?

By Sayed Ikram Afzali, Executive Director of Integrity Watch Afghanistan

Ordinary Afghans have been suffering from corruption while the corrupt political elite has been enjoying impunity for the last decade and a half. The state has been weakened due to this widespread corruption. Capture of state institutions, prevalent in the justice system, and further centralization of the state have been the underlying drivers of corruption and public discontent. President Ghani took office when criminal networks, backed by corrupt political elites, had captured state institutions. State institutions had become the mechanism for reinforcing the power of the corrupt elite. Grand corruption committed by the corrupt leadership of key institutions had been widespread. Petty corruption, which affected citizens directly on a day-to-day basis when they interact with state institutions, went unchecked due to the corruption at the top. Negative perceptions about state institutions due to such grand corruption had been increasing while continuing petty corruption had reinforced the public belief that state institutions do not represent the public interest. Corruption in the justice system has been widespread. Both public perception and experience has borne this out. Corruption in the security forces, especially the police, has taken hold due to criminals who have managed to buy positions within these forces. Those criminals have misused their power without being held accountable.

Involvement of senior police leadership in the narcotics business, organized crimes such as human trafficking and kidnapping, extortion and mistreatment of citizens, have all led to a state which has failed to protect its citizen’s rights. State institutions at the center, captured by corrupt networks, have relished further centralization of power. This has led to a lack of public participation. Accountability to the public remains nonexistent. The distance between citizens and the state has continued to grow in lockstep with the growth of an active insurgency. When a democracy fails to protect the public interest due to the failure, or corruption, of the institutions of state, people will lose trust in that state and start to look for alternatives. This can easily cause citizens to prefer authoritarian regimes and even to join, or at least support, insurgent networks. This has been the case in Afghanistan. The government is losing ground against the insurgency primarily because of institutional failure. President Ghani seems to have realized this more than anyone else in the Afghan leadership. The progress made in the area of procurement has been remarkable. In addition, high level appoints such as those of the Chief Justice, the Attorney General, and recently of the head of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC), although delayed for too long, are key to beginning the process of institutional reform. However, criminal networks are still the biggest roadblock in the implementation of the government’s reform agenda.

Another major problem has been the very approach of the government to tackle corruption – the government failing to institutionalize the fight against corruption which suffers from multi-organizational sub-optimization. There are several agencies to fight corruption with overlapping and underlapping mandates and with almost no coordination. The recently established Anti-Corruption Justice Center (ACJC) is a critical step to end the culture of impunity. However, many questions still remain and therefore broader institutional arrangements need to be addressed. The government must take bold steps such as abolishing the High Office of Oversight (HOO), clearly delineating the respective roles and responsibilities of other anti-corruption bodies, including the High Council for Governance, Rule of Law and Anti-corruption, the President’s Special Representative for Reform and Good Governance, and the IARCSC. The government must also establish an Independent Anti-Corruption Commission, in accordance with the principles of the Jakarta Declaration and the Afghan government’s obligations under the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC).

The mandate of the Commission shall include overseeing the ACJC, coordinating the anti-corruption efforts of government agencies, providing support and overseeing the development and implementation of line ministries’ anti-corruption action plans, and educating the public on corruption issues. The Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC) should serve as an advisory group to the proposed Independent Anti-Corruption Commission. Abolishing the HOO and realigning MEC’s mandate as an advisory group would reduce resource burden and more importantly address the problem of multi-organizational sub-optimization (too many cooks). If President Ghani is able to institutionalize the fight against corruption in the right way, it would result in ending the one and a half decades old culture of impunity. There is no doubt that with a political will and the appropriate institutional arrangements, the fight against corruption can be won.
Back in 2009, when we started our community based monitoring program in Herat, pervasive corruption had dominated the infrastructural projects there. Construction companies developed different ploys aimed at lowering their costs to save money on construction contracts between themselves donors.

One of the unethical practices employed by these companies was the mixing of dust and cement for use in plastering walls. This would affect the bonding and adhesive properties of the materials used, causing the walls to crack easily and the paint to chip off. These companies would also use lower grade materials than agreed upon in ratified contracts for framing building structures. Construction companies would make these switches once they had gotten approval from government monitors. They would replace standard quality beams with whatever rusty ones they could find. This would considerably undermine the resilience of the buildings and place inhabitants in serious danger. In at least one instance, I can remember that the ceilings of two girl’s schools in Herat collapsed, causing injury to students. Construction companies in some cases would even make unilateral changes to the agreed-upon project plans in order to lower cost. For example, a plan might specify the construction of six restrooms in a school, but the company would only build four.

Another problem I would like to mention existed in the area of road construction. There were cases where construction companies may have been hired to build gutters on both sides of the road. While the width of the walls for these gutters, according to the contract was designated at 20 cm, the companies would narrow them down to 12 or 15 cm. The resulting structures would crack and break under the stress of heavy vehicles which frequented these roads on a daily basis.

Now, after some years of community involvement in monitoring, this situation has improved considerably. Since March 2016, for example, we saw no illicit changes in Blueprint plans for any of the construction projects we monitored. Also, there were no cases—as had existed in the past—where inferior building materials were substituted for those approved of in contracts. These companies now take quick action in addressing problems brought to their attention by local monitors. More importantly, nowadays, the construction firms share relevant information with local monitors and allow them to be present at the sites for continuing observation of the entire building process. This had not been possible in the past.

These days, standards and guidelines are considered an essential requirement in the construction sector. I have to mention that, notwithstanding these progresses; we still face problems. Among these is the issue of the abundant flaws in the very plans approved by the ministry. Additionally, in the past, we observed that local councils, acting as authorized monitors, used to demand bribes from construction companies for allowing them to do their jobs. Fortunately, this problem has been mitigated. While apparently the face of corruption has changed for the better in the construction sector; the bulk of it had mostly to do with the use of sub-standard materials in building projects. These days however, we are grappling with the use of sub-contractors and a blatant disregard for recently established standards and guidelines. This has introduced new shortcomings in that sector. The main construction companies sign contracts with the Donors and then sub-contract the jobs to smaller companies or individuals. This phenomenon has created three major problems: first, the subcontractors are not bound by the standards specified in the main construction contracts. Secondly, many of these sub-contractors are unskilled and do not have the necessary equipment and knowledge to carry out the construction
process—knowledge such as the leveling of gradient for constructing sewers. The third problem is that these smaller construction companies still use low quality materials for construction in Herat.

**Question of the Month**

*How do you compare the performance of National Unity Government and Karzai government in the areas of recruitment, high ranking appointments and procurement?*

Danesh Karokhel, Chief Editor at Pajhwok Afghan News (PAN) believes that there were no clear and specific mechanisms for recruitment, appointments and procurement in previous government and the mechanisms which were existed were not working based on rules and procedures. The National Unity Government also lacks effective mechanisms for recruitment and appointments which are made based on personal and political affiliations. Both of the former electoral teams which have formed the National Unity Government and are governing partners now are trying to plunder the government positions without any consideration to rules and regulations. The recent scuffle between the leaders of the National Unity Government also stems from this problem. But in the field of procurement, a level of transparency has been maintained by the formation of mechanisms.

Mir Ahmad Joyenda, Deputy Director for Communication and Advocacy at Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) believes that in the previous government recruitment and appointments were heavily influenced by powerful people and only those who had affiliations with them were recruited or appointed to government positions and those who did not have such affiliations had fewer opportunities to obtain government positions. Mr. Joyenda believes that recruitment and appointments in National Unity Government has not improved and the 50-50 split of power between the two teams of the National Unity Government has led experts and experienced cadres who had not ties to the both teams left out of government positions. The National Unity Government leaders have paid more attention to those who were part of their electoral teams. For instance, in the establishment of Electoral Reforms Commission, instead of independent, experienced and expert individuals, they appointed individuals with no expertise and experience in elections based on the 50-50 split deal on major government positions. According to Mr. Joyenda, in procurement there has been a very strong progress due to the establishment of the National Procurement Commission by the president which has prevented illegal contracts and we could count on it in terms of prevention of corruption.

Lailuma Nasiri, Vice President at Afghanistan Justice Organization (AJO) believes that the current government is doing better than the previous government in the area of procurement since the President himself took the process and largely controls it. According to her, the recruitment process has not improved, is nontransparent as it was before and as in the past government employees are hired based on affiliations and bribery. Ms. Nasiri believes that although the appointments are still made based on affiliations and relationships, it seems that the president is willing to appoint people based on their qualifications. But according to her, the problem is that corruption and mediation has become a norm in Afghanistan and because of it we have been witnessed of the appointments of corrupt individuals who have been removed from their posts because of corruption to advisory posts. She concludes that although the President seems to be willing to appoint people based on their qualifications, unfortunately, in reality, there is not much difference in practice.
My family emigrated from Afghanistan to the U.S. when I was very young. My family is originally from Laghman. I grew up in the U.S., studied bio-chemistry and received my master’s degree in public policy. During those years we were living in the U.S., my family and I always maintained our strong relations with Afghanistan, paying attention to its politics. In 2005, my brother who is very close to me went to live and work in Afghanistan and I followed him. After I arrived, I started working in ADS Where I met Yama Torabi and Lorenzo, the founders of Integrity Watch Afghanistan. After we met and spoke about our common interest in Anti-corruption work they asked me to join them in establishing Integrity Watch Afghanistan. This is how the organization was created.

By establishing Integrity Watch Afghanistan, we aimed to focus on promoting a culture of oversight and accountability; Integrity Watch certainly pioneered this campaign. In those years, community monitoring was implemented in countries that had circumstances similar to those in Afghanistan. Integrity Watch adopted this idea and tailored it suit the needs and culture of local Afghan communities. I have to mention that community activity was not a foreign idea in Afghanistan. In fact, throughout history, we had witnessed that, given the need, people would get together to resolve problems in their communities--problems such as the cleaning of sewers or repairing roads, etc. I just want to make it clear that some of the groundwork was already in place in Afghan society.

What Integrity Watch did was create a firm structural umbrella for these scattered community undertakings. Of course, some hesitation existed in those first days when community based monitoring programs were being launched. We should bear in mind that community based monitoring can be effective only when the government and donors maintain a collaborative relationship with the monitors. Initially, such collaboration was minimal. Now things have changed; donors and government have considerably increased the level of their collaboration with Integrity Watch Afghanistan.

Another area in which Integrity Watch Afghanistan has made accomplishments is in the field of research. Integrity Watch has done comprehensive research into corruption in Afghanistan and is able to provide reliable information which can benefit Afghan policy-makers.

In my opinion, the greatest accomplishment Integrity Watch has made is in establishing a robust organizational structure that lends itself effectively toward fighting corruption in Afghanistan. Presently, the organization has put into place a young, ethnically diverse team whose performance and work ethics are exemplary.

There remain, however, particular areas which the organization must invest and develop in. Among these are research, communication and outreach, in-depth monitoring and evaluation of programs and projects. These days, the Afghan government is busy drawing up plans for the upcoming years. Integrity Watch Afghanistan must find ways to connect more closely with decision makers and push them to adopt and incorporate anti-corruption measures into their plans. Integrity Watch Afghanistan is in a prime position to do that because if it’s solid skill and knowledge base. Finally, Integrity Watch must further enhance its ties with other civil society organizations in order to boost the momentum for change and to solidify today’s campaign to create transparency and integrity in Afghan society.

Overall, I have to say that Integrity Watch Afghanistan has successfully identified itself as a promising force in the fight against corruption in Afghanistan. The organization has established a solid reputation in Afghan society. The variety of the projects the organization has undertaken, both in the area of policy-making and implementation has undoubtedly boosted its reputation.

These days, I am working as an advisor in The Ministry of Finance, focusing on the effectiveness of aid projects. I have chosen to stay in Afghanistan, despite security as well as other problems, because of my passion for this work. There are lots of moments that I have to struggle with disappointment; yet, I am sure I can serve my country.

"Integrity Watch Afghanistan created a new monitoring structure based on collective activities of the past."

–Khwaga Kakar, one of the founding members of IWA and Advisor to Ministry of Finance.
Everyone asks us why we chose to establish a monitoring program for schools in Afghanistan? The answer is that according to many surveys, the Ministry of Education has been ranked as one of the top five most corrupt government institutions in Afghanistan. With this in mind, Integrity Watch Afghanistan launched its first school monitoring program in the Jabal Seraj district of Parwan province in 2012. After a year of implementation, seeing its positive impact, the local people wanted the program to continue. Due to the lack of financial resources, however, the program was suspended in 2013.

With the financial support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the program was given a new lease on life that same year. The program was reestablished and initially covered a total of 27 schools. After a year of implementation, Integrity Watch Afghanistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Education. Currently, based on that same MoU, the program is now monitoring 150 schools, about half of which are girls’ schools. 150 volunteer local monitors are also actively involved in this monitoring, including 43 female monitors.

Local monitors are now focusing on two major types of problems. First, are problems related to school administration and operations? These concern issues such as service delivery, sanitation, the attendance of teachers and support staff, teachers’ lesson plans, etc. Second, are problems that concern government organs such as the Ministry of Education and the Education Departments? The problems here have to do with proper allocation of funding and resources to the schools as well as decision-making that falls under the auspices of the education authorities.

We are trying to help local people pinpoint the problems in their schools and to help them resolve those problems with the help and assistance of School administrators. We are flexible in the implementation of our programs working with each school based on their own particular needs and problems. We have been able to solve many of the problems in these schools; and this has restored people’s interest and cooperation.

One of the challenges to our work has been the lack of direct student involvement in the monitoring process. Currently, we are working to establish 90 integrity clubs within the schools affiliated with our monitoring program. Our aim is to get students involved in the process. The importance of student participation lies in the fact that students are the direct beneficiaries of school services and they are better able to understand the problems and help come up with solutions for them. We hope to foster in these young people a sense of responsibility and a keenness for participation in matters which directly affect their futures. They are also the ones who can transfer this spirit to others and thus, create real involvement in the monitoring of hospitals, courts, infrastructural projects etc. Currently, the school monitoring program operates as a simple and effective structure. It is our hope that, over time, this program can be extended nationwide and become an integral part of the Ministry of Education’s Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) approach. Monitoring should be included in the responsibilities of schools and should be implemented through school councils. I believe that if the Ministry of Education institutionalizes this program as a part of their formal structure, it would help in solving the problems schools face, it would improve the effectiveness of service delivery and it would mitigate the problem of ghost schools, ghost teachers and ghost students.

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